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AUTHOR Staub, Debbie
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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes findings of a 3-year study assessing outcomes for 35 children (preschool to high school aged) with mild to severe disabilities in inclusive educational settings. Additionally, the study looked at "connected" pairs of children--each pair including a child with and a child without a disability. It identified three main areas of friendship outcomes for children with and without disabilities: warm and caring companions; growth in social cognition and self-concept; and development of personal principles. Teachers who wish to facilitate friendships in inclusive settings are encouraged to: (1) recognize and value the importance of social context for all learners; (2) structure learning opportunities that not only teach values, but allow children to experience such values everyday; and (3) provide classroom and instructional structures that foster peer relationships in caring community schools. Researchers are urged to investigate such questions as how schooling experiences affect children's ideas about who they are and how they fit into the community. (DB)

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Qualitative Research on School Inclusion: What do we know? What do we need to find out?

Debbie Staub

University of Washington

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Introduction

For the past three years, my colleagues and I from the Inclusive Schools Research Group have followed 35 children (preschool to high school aged) with mild to severe disabilities in inclusive settings. We have collected narrative records of the behavior of these children, their nondisabled peers, teachers, and other adults in classrooms and other school settings, as well as interviews with parents and teachers, video records, and survey measures in order to describe and analyze the outcomes of inclusion.

We have used this data base to build a framework that describes many of the most robust outcomes of inclusion for the children we have studied. This framework includes many child outcomes which go substantially beyond those which appear in traditional curriculum and assessments tools, and we have found that many of the most important outcomes of inclusion for children with disabilities are often overlooked by traditional assessments.

In addition to our longitudinal efforts to assess the outcomes for the participants in our study with severe disabilities, we have conducted a three-year longitudinal study of pairs of children who have been identified by their general education teacher as "connected." Each pair of students includes a child with disabilities and a child without disabilities. By employing case study methodology, we are able to describe and analyze the unique relationships between these pairs of students attending a fully inclusive elementary school. We have developed multifaceted and holistic descriptions of these relationships, which has provided information that has allowed us to begin to unpack the

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meanings of these relationships for students with and without disabilities. Finally, our exploration into the literature on children's friendship patterns has given us a template for evaluating the quality of social relationships between children with and without disabilities. This research has resulted in the development of several questions that have guided our study and interest in friendships: 1)What do we know about children's friendships? 2) What meanings do friendships have on children? and 3) How can friendships be supported and maintained? By sharing the stories of children with and without disabilities who have become friends, we have come to better understand the importance and development of these relationships from the perspectives of the children themselves.

Following is a brief summary of what we believe to be the highlights of our findings in relation to these questions from both our review of the literature and our case studies.

What do we know about children's friendships?

According to Hartup (1978a), the development of peer relationships "proceeds from simple organizations to complex hierarchies, from loosely differentiated interchanges to differentiated interactions, and from primitive awareness of the needs of others to reciprocal relations based on complex attributions" (p. 147).

Bigelow and La Gaipa (1975) analyzed the written responses of Canadian children in grades one through eight. Using nine dimensions of variables, they conceptualized three stages of development in the section of friends:

1) Common activities, propinquity, and helping. During this stage, selection is typically based on engagement in common activities and propinquity. Young children will also select their friends on the basis of the child's behavior toward themselves as well as others. At this stage, ego reinforcement and helping are often mentioned as factors leading toward the selection of a peer as a potential friend.

2) Character admiration. Bigelow (1977) found that during the second and third grades, a reward cost stage emerged in which children appeared to weight the cost of their

efforts in relation to gains from friends. During the fourth and fifth grades, dimensions of sharing including norms, values, rules, and sanctions, emerged as important markers of friendly behavior. "Best friend" relationships appear at approximately this age and friendships become more stable. Children around this stage also become increasingly aware of the deeper characteristics of potential friends and will begin to look for similarities in character or personality.

3) Loyalty, commitment, and intimacy potential. Children at this stage, report the acts that demonstrate friendship between two people as the sharing of private thoughts and feelings out of a sense of mutual respect and affection. In particular, adolescents view loyalty and commitment as essential qualities in a best friend.

Bigelow and La Gaipa (1980) believe that friendships are facilitated and maintained by the exchange of intimate information, emotional support, and doing things together on a consistent basis. A mother of a typically developing sixth grader, Stacy, discusses her daughter's commitment to her friend Carrie, a fellow sixth grader with Down syndrome:

> It's been an investment in a relationship for Stacy. And I think that's true of any friend, no matter if they are Carrie or if they are somebody else. If you care about your friends, then you invest your time, you invest your emotions and you invest whatever is necessary to make the relationship work. And she's her friend. So I don't think the relationship is because Stacy is trying to get anything special out of Carrie. I think she cares about her. And Carrie cares about Stacy.

While Stacy and Carrie have made a commitment to the maintenance of their friendship, another girl, Theresa, a typically developing seventh grader, would also like to maintain her three year friendship with Cathy, a seventh grade student with severe disabilities. Unfortunately, Theresa is having difficulties maintaining a friendship with Cathy given a shift in roles from being Cathy's friend to being Cathy's assigned care taker. At the same time, Cathy appears to be asserting her independence and seems resentful for

this change in their relationship. It is likely that Theresa and Cathy's friendship will terminate in the near future given the growing drift in their developmental levels, Cathy's lack of appropriate social skills in resolving conflict with Theresa, and Theresa's frustrations with her role as a friend versus helper.

According to Bigelow and La Gaipa (1980) "The termination of friendship appears to involve redefinitions and negative labels of the other person rather than lack of benefits and rewards." (p. 36). Asher and Gottman (1981) believe that there are developmental differences in the way friendships are terminated. For younger, primary aged children, the ending of a friendship usually occurs because there is lack of opportunity for continued contact, or a change in activity preferences. These researchers also found that for the older children "friendship is terminated not simply by a decrease in contact or a lapse in positive interaction, but by frequent displays of lack of understanding and disloyalty." (p. 296).

What meanings do friendships have on children?

Mannarino (1980) states that it is the concept of reciprocity which is the essential component of friendship and that it should be included in the definition of the term "friendship." According to Mannarino, two individuals can be said to have a friendship only if the affection and/or esteem that one expresses toward the other is reciprocated.

The research to date is very positive about the benefits that typically developing children acquire as a function of their relationships with a peer with moderate or severe disabilities. However, many of the benefits which have been highlighted have been studied within the context of the nondisabled child in the role of helper and the child with disabilities in the role of the "helpee." What are the outcomes for children with and without disabilities who are engaged in more friendly, mutually based relationships? We have identified three main areas of outcomes for children with and without disabilities identified as friends:

1) Warm and caring companions. Stacy and Carrie have a warm and caring relationship which has lasted for four years now. Carrie benefits in many ways from her friendship with Stacy as their former fifth grade teacher explains: "Stacy can quietly affect Carrie's behavior in the most positive way, which is done very quietly. She gets Carrie to do the appropriate thing that she can instead of acting up." An observer, very familiar with these two girls, shares what she thinks this relationship means to Stacy: "Stacy benefits from Carrie because she can see the growth Carrie is making and she is a big part of the success. She also benefits because Carrie makes her feel good - - always choosing to sit with her, always goofing around with her."

2) Growth in social cognition and self-concept. For Aaron, a typically developing sixth grader who is friends with Cole, a classmate with severe disabilities, their relationship has given Aaron an opportunity to be a leader which has led to increases in his self-esteem. Aaron's ability to understand Cole's behaviors has helped Aaron to be in a leadership type of role which according to his sixth grade teacher, he has not had the opportunity in the past to assume: "So, he gets that place, Aaron has that place because he's been with Cole all year in terms of friendship and because of the attention that the inclusive schooling's got, it's like, 'yeah, I am this important person.'" Cole has also benefited from his relationship with Aaron in that he has a trusted friend to serve as a role model and mentor.

3) Development of personal principles. Finally, we have found that many of the nondisabled students who were close friends to a peer with disabilities, grew in their commitment to personal moral and ethical principles. In particular, many of these students have become advocates for their friend with disabilities. For example, in Carrie's sixth grade class, her classmates became very vocal about making sure that Carrie was not pulled out of the classroom by the special education staff to work on skills which they believe she could practice on in the classroom. As a result of their concerns, the students asked their teacher to conduct class meetings with Carrie present to discuss strategies which would ensure her inclusion in their class.

How can educators support and facilitate friendships in inclusive settings?

While much has been written about the skills necessary for friendship, our focus has been on those structures that surround children daily that either support or impede the development of friendships. We have found that classroom climate, instructional practices, and teacher behavior may differentially affect the development and maintenance of children's friendships. To insure that all children have opportunities for friendships requires a reflection of our current teaching practices and discussion regarding the fundamental purpose and structure of contemporary schools. To accomplish this goal we believe that there are three areas we should focus our attention: 1) To recognize and value the importance of social context for learning for all learners; 2) to structure learning opportunities that not only teach values, but allow children to experience such values in everyday; and, 3) to provide classroom and instructional structures that foster peer relationships in caring community schools.

What do we need to find out? Recommended research priorities

While we believe that our research has provided us with many insights regarding the friendships between children with and without disabilities, we have only begun to explore this very exciting topic. Some questions yet to be addressed include the following: 1) How do schooling experiences affect the development of children's ideas about who they are and where and how they belong and fit into the community? We need a more holistic and "in depth" look at what is going on in inclusive schools; 2) How can both theory development and measurement work be responsive to the broader view of child outcomes implied in the above question?; and, 3) How can intervention research help us to understand how the specific contextual features of classrooms and other school structures may be changed to promote valued outcomes?

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